

“Closing the Gap for Aboriginal Students”  
by Dr. Emily Faries

Meeting the education needs of Aboriginal students requires a deep understanding of their culture, worldview and historical experience. In order to adequately address the needs of Aboriginal students, one must be aware of the historical experience of Aboriginal people in the area of education. The impact of education is intergenerational, meaning that the education experience and attitudes of the parents and prior generations impact upon the students of today, the current generation. Educators need to identify with the situation so that they can understand why and how they can help Aboriginal students.

Historically since European contact, Aboriginal people have been deprived of learning about their own culture, history, and language in the education systems. In its attempts to eradicate Aboriginal culture and language, schools were used to assimilate children so that future generations would not pass on Aboriginal teachings. Foreign imposed education systems were used as a way to “Europeanize” the Aboriginal people, and the children were seen as the easiest targets to ensure that future generations would no longer relate to their culture, language and identity of their ancestors.

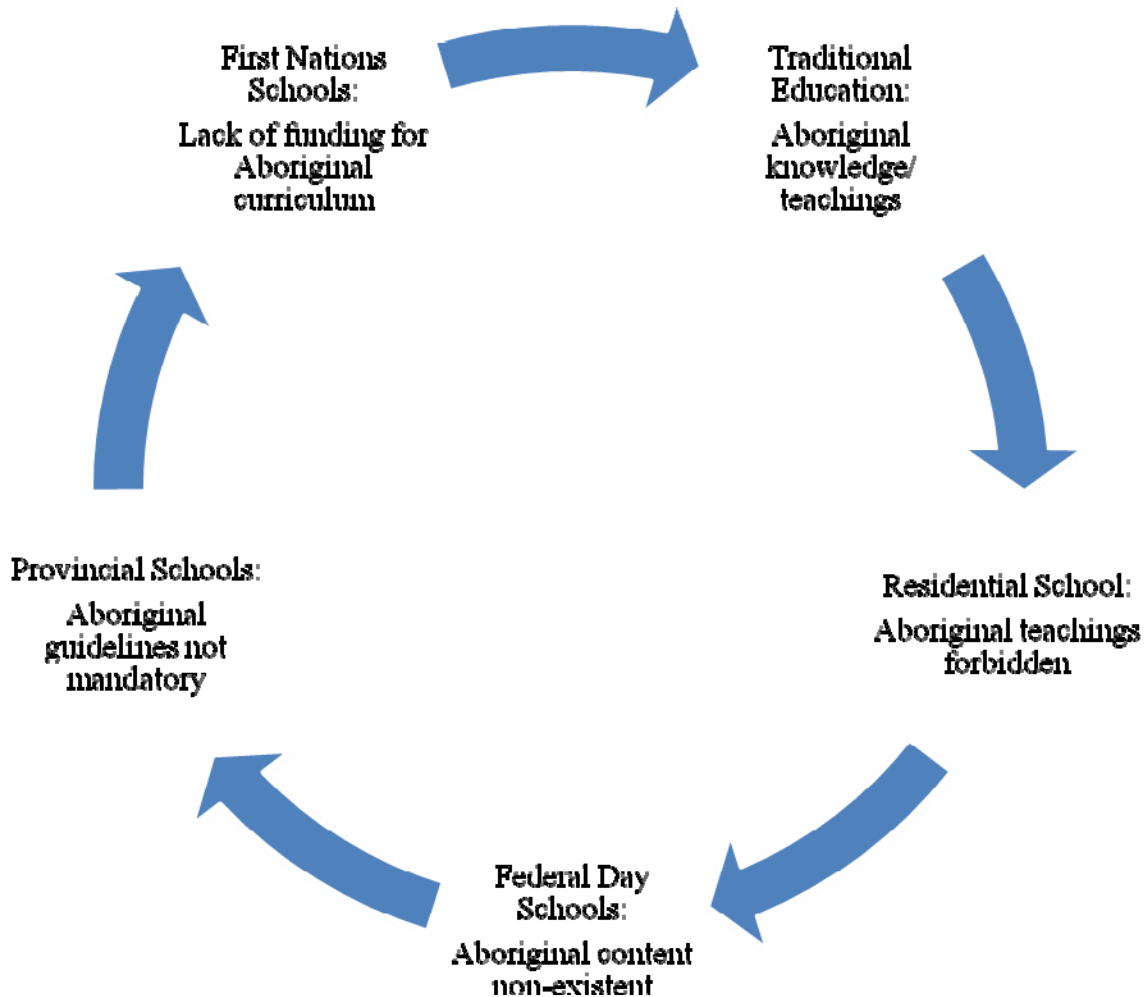
Residential schools were set up to destroy culture and language, and the impacts of this school system can still be felt today among Aboriginal individuals, families, communities and nations. Children were forbidden to practise their culture and language.

Following the residential school era, federal day schools were established so that Aboriginal children could attend schools on reserves. The federal day schools had no recognition of culture and language in the school programming and continued the destruction of Aboriginal culture. Children learned only non-Native history, culture, values and language. “It must be straightforwardly realized that education, as currently practiced, is cultural genocide. It seeks to brainwash the Native child, substituting non-Native knowledge, values and identity.” (Hampton, 1995, p.35)

Beginning in the 1950s, there was a push by the federal government to integrate Aboriginal students into provincial schools. The federal government revised the Indian Act in 1951 to allow the federal government to purchase education services from provincial education authorities. “In 1951, a new Indian Act formalized the general aim of the federal government as integration of Indians into Canadian society. The place of Indian children in provincial schools was the principal means of achieving this goal.” (Persson, 1986, p.157)

Aboriginal students have been impacted by imposed education systems which have not addressed their needs, either through their own experience or through the education experience of their parents, grandparents and extended family. Negative experience in education has resulted in apathy and lack of interest in education, therefore education is not promoted nor valued by family members who have been negatively impacted by education. Aboriginal students need parental encouragement, positive role models and Aboriginal content in order to succeed academically.

## Historical Overview on Teaching of Aboriginal Content



The core of Aboriginal culture is spirituality; Aboriginal people have always been a spiritual people. Prior to contact, their governance and education systems were built on their spirituality. The foundation of spirituality was paramount to all that they did. Schools need to reinforce the cultural beliefs: "... the identity of an Aboriginal student is based in his or her spirituality... One's spirituality is the inner resource that facilitates knowing oneself, one's surroundings, and finding meaning for oneself in connection and relation to those surroundings." (Doige, 2003, p.146-7)

Just as education had been used in the past to destroy Aboriginal culture and language, education can now be used to build, restore and revive Aboriginal culture, history, values and beliefs through the schools in which Native children attend. "Education can enhance survival of First Nations people only if it contributes to identity development through learning our languages, our

cultural traditions, and our spiritual beliefs” (Longboat, 1994, p.39-40). Only then will our people come “full circle” in reviving traditional aboriginal knowledge and cultural identity.

Education should meet the needs of Aboriginal people, rather than Aboriginal people meeting the needs of the education systems, but it has happened in the past and continues today. Aboriginal research has repeatedly affirmed that “the First Nations seek the development of more spiritually based, more natural, and culturally whole approaches to education” (AFN, vol 1. p.73). Government reports have also documented the need of Aboriginal content curriculum:

“The integration of First Nations knowledge and wisdom into curricula and pedagogy in education systems, both in First Nations and provinces and territories, will provide First Nations learners with a positive learning environment and encourage student success.” (INAC, 2002)

The lack of Aboriginal curriculum has also been acknowledged in government documents. The Auditor General’s Report 2000 expresses that “the Department does not have the necessary assurance that First Nations students are receiving culturally appropriate education.” (Auditor General’s Report, 2000, p.4.5). Furthermore, other government reports such as the Minister’s working group report recommend that “...Canada must work together with all stakeholders to ensure that Indigenous Knowledge is respected and promoted in all funded educational programs and services” (INAC, 2002)

The dire need of educational resources which contain accurate and relevant content about Aboriginal people, their history and culture is identified as a major challenge in all First Nations schools in Ontario.

Accurate and relevant information about Aboriginal people in books is seriously lacking. The AFN’s national study found that:

“Textbooks now in use generally ignore the First Nations contribution to Canadian history and are full of inaccuracies. These messages foster internal conflicts in First Nations students. The contributions that First Nations have made to the development of Canada are still not incorporated into all school subjects. Rather, cultural programs are isolated very often into an historical context with no emphasis given to the philosophies and values that are essential to the development of a strong First Nations identity and traditional intellect.” (AFN, vol 1, p.78)

The same concern is reiterated in the report by the Minister’s national working group which states that “provincial and territorial authorities need to be aware constantly of the portrayal of First Nations and First Nations history in textbooks and learning materials to ensure that young Canadians receive accurate information and knowledge about First Nations.” (INAC, 2002) It is also recommended in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples report that Aboriginal

specific materials be integrated into all school systems, and that partnerships between governments and Native educators is essential.

“Federal, provincial and territorial governments collaborate with Aboriginal governments, organizations and educators to develop or continue developing innovative curricula that reflect Aboriginal cultures and community realities, for delivery.. at all grade levels of elementary and secondary schools; in schools operating under Aboriginal control; and in schools under provincial and territorial jurisdiction.” (RCAP, vol 3, chapter 5, section 3.2)

Foreign imposed education systems have damaged the sense of identity among Aboriginal people. Parents who were dispossessed with no opportunity to learn about their own peoples’ culture and language find themselves in a difficult situation where they are not able to teach their children. Traditional knowledge is paramount to understanding one’s Aboriginal identity, as it is “a discrete system of knowledge with its own philosophical and value base. Aboriginal peoples hold the belief that traditional knowledge derives from the Creator and is spiritual in essence. It includes ecological teachings, medical knowledge, common attitudes toward Mother Earth and the Circle of Life, and a sense of kinship with all creatures” (RCAP,v3,c5,s7). Traditional knowledge forms the foundation of an Aboriginal person’s life, and it has been found that “cultural education programs provide the foundation for the child’s pride, self-perception and identity.” (AFN, vol 1, p.107).

For over thirty years, the First Nations people have repeatedly articulated that:

Indian children must have the opportunity to learn their language, history and culture in the classroom. Curricula [must] recognize the contributions which the Indian people have made to Canadian history and life. (NIB, 1972, p28)

The Aboriginal youth of today are seeking for meaning of life; they are searching for an identity. Research has reiterated the importance of fostering a positive identity through education. The Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples report affirms that:

“Elders expressed deep concern to [RCAP] Commissioners about the current state of education. While they do not reject participation in Canadian education, they question the exclusion of traditional knowledge and its methods of transmission. They see that young people and adults emerge from school with a confused sense of Aboriginal identity and without the basic cultural knowledge to participate fully in the traditions of their society” (RCAP, v3, c5, s7)

Reports conducted by the federal government have also recognized the essential need of incorporating Aboriginal content into the school curriculum. The Minister’s national working group paper states that:

“Centuries of commerce, cultural evolution and social interaction among First Nations have produced a vast body of knowledge worthy of inclusion in all schools and post-secondary institutions as valid and important learning material.” (INAC, 2002)

Countless studies and reports from First Nations groups have confirmed the necessity of Aboriginal specific curriculum to prepare students for successful lives. “With a solid grounding in one’s own culture and positive identity, students become much higher achievers in all areas of education and life.” (AFN, vol 1, p.73) Government documents such as the Auditor General’s Report 2000 fully support the need for Aboriginal specific education, as it states “we believe that success in providing education to Indian students can be achieved only if their needs and aspirations are appropriately identified and served by an education system that is designed to meet them.” (Auditor General, 2000, p 4-22)

In this day and age, Aboriginal students can no longer be deprived of learning their culture, history, values and worldview. In fact culture-based knowledge should be their foundational learning. If children are taught about their people and culture throughout their education, they will naturally develop a positive self identity as an aboriginal person. On the other hand, as in the past, if the children’s culture is not part of the school curriculum, then eventually they get the message that their culture is not important and is inferior.

Today the schools have the opportunity to fix the wrongs of the past; schools are in the position to promote and foster cultural identity and pride among Aboriginal students. If students have a positive identity and pride in who they are as Aboriginal people, they will naturally have self esteem which in turn fosters self confidence. With this type of education, Aboriginal students will have a strong foundation on which to build upon resulting in more success rates in education at all levels.

In 2007, the Ontario Ministry of Education identified Aboriginal education as a priority and released a position, “Ontario First Nation, Metis and Inuit Education Policy Framework: Delivering Quality Education to Aboriginal Students in Ontario’s Provincially Funded Schools”. This document states that “the Ministry is committed to developing strategies that will:

- Increase the capacity of the education system to respond to the learning and cultural needs of First Nations, Metis and Inuit students;
- Provide quality programs, services and resources to help create learning opportunities for First Nations, Metis and Inuit students that support improved academic achievement and identity building;
- Provide a curriculum that facilitates learning about contemporary and traditional First Nation, Metis and Inuit cultures, histories and perspectives among all students, and that also contributes to the education of school board staff, teachers and elected trustees; and
- Develop and implement strategies that facilitate increased participation by First Nation, Metis and Inuit parents, students, communities and organizations in working to support academic success.” (Ontario Ministry, 2007, p.7)

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